

March 19, 2009

NATIONAL
TRUST
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HISTORIC
PRESERVATION®

Penelope Clark, Chair
Heritage Preservation Commission
402 City Hall
Duluth, MN 55803

Midwest
OFFICE

RE: Demolition Application for St. Louis County Jail, Application #109966,

Dear Chair Clark:

Having carefully reviewed the information provided by Scalzo Architects regarding the proposed systematic demolition of the 1924 St. Louis County Jail, the National Trust for Historic Preservation encourages the Duluth Heritage Preservation Commission to deny St. Louis County's permit application for demolition. The National Trust for Historic Preservation is a private, nonprofit membership organization dedicated to protecting the irreplaceable. The Trust provides leadership, education and advocacy to save America's diverse historic places and revitalize communities. Its Washington, D.C. headquarters staff, nine regional offices and 20 historic sites work with the Trust's quarter-million members.

As the nation's leading preservation advocacy organization, it is our opinion that demolition of the St. Louis County Jail would remove a significant piece of Duluth's history, and clearly would compromise the integrity of the Duluth Civic Center Heritage Preservation Landmark District, regardless of the level of documentation that will be done to record the structure. The St. Louis County Jail was built in 1923 as a component of Duluth's Civic Center complex, which also includes the St. Louis County Courthouse (1909), Duluth City Hall (1928), and the Federal Building (1929). The complex, planned by renowned architect Daniel Burnham and constructed over twenty years through the work of local architects, is an excellent example of the City Beautiful Movement in Minnesota.

It is our understanding that the Commission requested supplemental information from the applicant regarding reuse alternatives, and documentation to demonstrate the economic

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feasibility of demolition in comparison to stabilization, mothballing, and other options. Although numerous alternatives for the reuse of the historic Jail have been recommended in past studies, all have been dismissed by the County as too costly or too difficult. This seems to be a rather short-sighted approach to what is potentially an exciting and innovative redevelopment opportunity in Duluth's historic downtown. Several models for the creative and successful adaptive reuse of historic jails exist around the country. Two of the most notable recent examples of rehabilitation for structures similar to the St. Louis County Jail are:

- Allegheny Jail in Pennsylvania, which had similar structural issues that were creatively resolved through the insertion of a new internal structural system, and
- The adaptive reuse of the 1851 former Charles Street Jail, in the Beacon Hill neighborhood of Boston, MA, now operating as the 300-room luxury Liberty Hotel.

The County and Mr. Scalzo also cited the continued and accelerating deterioration of the building and its terra cotta decorative elements as justification for the quick disassembly of the structure, since the spalling terra cotta presents "an increased public health and life safety hazard." The applicant neglects to note that this deterioration is a direct result of the County's lack of maintenance and upkeep on the structure for well over a decade. The County, like all property owners, has a responsibility to maintain their buildings in a manner that does not endanger public safety or health. Minimal investment of funds by the County, and the resulting "demolition by neglect," are not valid arguments for destruction of properties. This is particularly true for structures that are recognized on the National Register of Historic Places, and are owned and managed by public entities.

The Midwest Office recommends that the Jail be mothballed and stabilized in the short-term to preserve the structural integrity, so that a private developer or public/private partnership can explore viable reuses for this historic structure. We also recommend reallocation of the \$525,000 that the County currently has earmarked for demolition of the Jail. These funds could be put to a more productive use for stabilization, to develop a reuse plan for the property, and to market it to potential new owners/developers.

For these reasons, the Midwest Office recommends that the Heritage Preservation Commission deny the permit for demolition of the St. Louis County Jail. Thank you for considering our comments. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Royce A. Yeater, AIA
Midwest Director

Cc: Don Ness, Mayor, City of Duluth
Dennis Gimmestad, Minnesota Historic Preservation Agency
Erin Hanafin Berg, Preservation Alliance of Minnesota
Julia Miller, Legal Defense Fund, National Trust for Historic Preservation